

I witnessed a Christmas miracle



By former Captain LEONARD P. La RUE

As told to Lester David

14,000 frightened men, women and children huddled on the Korean coast... There was no place to flee. But—it was the season of miracles. Here, from one of the most unusual heroes of any war, is the story

Illustrated by John McDermott

★ *The great Hungnam rescue of December, 1950, passed virtually unnoticed in the midst of the Chinese Communist offensive that dark winter of the Korean War. Since then, the feat of Captain La Rue and his merchant mariners has become partly known—but the full story of their incredible voyage has never before been told. Today, we are proud to present the man who was formerly called Captain Leonard P. La Rue, U.S. Merchant Marine. We believe you will agree that no more fitting story than his could be told at*

I will always remember with awe and reverence the fantastic voyage we made ten years ago Christmas, on the other side of the world.

I believe God sailed with us those three days. I believe this because by all the laws of logic the loss of life could have been enormous. Yet not a soul perished. Time after time, dangers that threatened to explode into disaster were miraculously averted.

Perhaps you too will find a deepened inspiration in the events of three remarkable days in the bleak winter of 1950.

It was shortly before Christmas and, under a slate-gray sky, the Chinese Communists' big guns were bombarding the port city of Hungnam on the northeast coast of Korea.

My ship, the S.S. *Meredith Victory*, was riding at anchor a few miles offshore. She was a merchant vessel, under charter to the Military Sea Transportation Service to supply our meager forces in the

South Korean refugees thronged the docks. There was everything they could wheel, or drag. Beside them, like frightened chickens, were their children.

As far as my glasses could sweep, the docks were dark with masses of humanity, all caught in a giant vise. Behind them were the Communists who would kill or enslave them; before them was the vast open sea.

Sleep was impossible that night under the constant shelling and all next day I resumed my post from the bridge. The docks were becoming blacker with people. Then a message was sent to us by a blinker signal light. It came from a naval vessel commanding our sea forces in the area and ordered me to proceed toward the docks to shore. Army officers boarded us and one said, "Can you help us evacuate the civilians?"

"Of course," I replied. "How many could we take?" he inquired. "I don't know," I answered. "Maybe a couple of thousand, if we're lucky."

Now night had fallen. Shells from our own ships in back of us screamed over our heads. We could tell that the enemy had found the route to the port. Despite the obvious risk, all our ships were switched on while we prepared to load.

In double danger

We were sitting ducks, perfectly outlined against the glare, yet no enemy shell struck even close. Our own heavy guns could easily have lobbed into the crush of people by mistake. Yet no one was hurt.

The incredibly difficult job of loading the crowded refugees began. All dock space was taken. We had to make fast to a Liberty Ship moored nearby. Hastily, our crewmen built a ramp to the *Meredith Victory*. Then we began herding the refugees across it, over the rail on the opposite side and on to the *Meredith Victory*.

Both ships rocked crazily from the concussion of our own shells. Yet the refugees were going safely. I saw terror on their faces as they kept young ones close. Meekly they heeded our shouts, "bali, bali!" Korean for "hurry, hurry!" the few words we knew in the language.

Where did we put them? We crammed the every bit of available space. In some parts of the ship, there are three tiers of cargo holds. Into these we jammed humanity. We put batches into the topmost holds by herding them onto narrow wooden platforms and lowering them by means of winches. Then we partially sealed the holds, leaving only some air spaces. Atop the lowest hold, the 'tween-decks cargo areas, we stacked more people.

There were families with eight and ten children and we took them all. There was a man playing a violin, a woman with a sewing machine, a young girl with triplets. There were 17 wounded, some still





We herded them onto platforms and lowered them by winches . . . There were families with eight and ten children . . . Finally, we had 14,000 human beings

ny who were aged, hundreds of babies. lined aboard. moment, I expected the cry: "That's all." It came all during that night. "It's crazy," I told officer along about dawn. "It's like joke the clowns play in the circus, where ants get into one tiny car." Somehow, e, 3,000 tons of steel were stretching to n for all who were coming.

as the sun rode high the next morning, 14,000 human beings jammed aboard! It sible — and yet they were there. There : that much room — yet there was.

is cargo of souls, we steamed out to the ward Pusan on the southeast Korean n 450 sea miles, or about 28 hours' jour-

We were facing waters mined by the enemy with a vessel that had no means of detecting them or destroying them.

We knew that Communist submarines, operating in the vicinity, could easily spot us and sink us with a torpedo.

One spark — a fiery finish

We realized only too well that in the No. 2 lower hold were 300 tons of highly flammable jet fuel. A spark could turn the ship into a funeral pyre.

We had no escort vessels, and no way to protect ourselves against air raids.

Yet nothing touched us during that incredible voyage toward Pusan.

That evening, a crewman elbowed his way up to

many you figure we got on board?" A little annoyed, I snapped back: "How the count — 14,000."

"Well, captain, we got on board, certainly. It's 14,001 now!" Then he was gone. Our first baby had been born.

I cannot possibly describe the nightmarish quality of that journey. We had no food and almost no water for the refugees — they ate only what they could bring aboard. There were no extra blankets, no clothing to warm them. Yet they behaved well.

That is, until night came. Then suddenly, with almost no warning, an ominous thing happened. A few of the younger men advanced menacingly on the crew's living quarters up on deck. They were after food — who could blame them? A riot seemed imminent. What would have happened if 14,000

Continued from page 9

Danger rode with us on Christmas day

to one small ship, had suddenly become maddened terror? I doubt that the vessel itself could have revived. We all knew how swiftly panic could spread, especially at sea. We knew, and many of us were white-faced with the dread we felt inside as we listened to the rumble of that menacing mob. Yet the riot never occurred. Without knowing the language, the ship's officers and men somehow made the frightened and angry refugees understand that safety was now only a few hours away.

A little while later, I received another announcement: Our second baby had been born! The crew named them, using the Korean word for a popular national dish — Kim Chee. We called the first Meredith Victory Kim Chee One, the second M.V. Kim Chee Two!

Next afternoon we anchored at Pusan. Relief? It shone on every face. But this was not to be journey's end. Officials came alongside. "I've got 14,000 refugees," I told them. "Where do I put them?" I was stunned at their reply: "Not here." They gave me a variety of naval and military reasons which I suppose made sense, but could you picture my chagrin! And could you imagine the fright of the refugees when they realized there was more of the nightmare voyage yet to come!

fty more miles

"Head for the island of Koje," I was told. "It's only about fifty miles to the southwest." Before weighing anchor, however, I was determined to get some help for my people. It took hours wading through red tape, but we finally managed to get food, water and some blankets and clothing from our own military supplies in Pusan. I also had a few interpreters and military police to make the last leg of the journey with us.

Suddenly the thought struck: "This is Christmas Eve. The night has come on, clear and cold." The people aboard ship were being helped and their fears were being calmed by the interpreters. And yet something else was happening. I was astonished to see members of my crew going among the people, distributing their own extra clothing.

The message of Christmas, the message of kindness and good will, had come to this woe-laden ship, these people aboard who, like the Holy Family many centuries before, were themselves refugees from a tyrannical force. I thought as I watched: there was no room for them, no room in their

to me. "Captain," he said softly, smiling, "we may be having a few more births. Maybe tonight."

I smiled back. And I knew then that, no matter what lay ahead, this ship would deliver her cargo of souls safely to port.

We got underway again on Christmas Day, and arrived at Koje within a few hours. Since the harbor was small and crowded, we had to remain in the open sea overnight.

And here, too, danger rode with us. The only way we could unload was with the aid of LST's, large ships designed to land tanks on shores during combat. One after the other, two of these vessels drew alongside and again we went through a nerve-jangling ordeal. Each person had to climb the rail of the *Victory* and be lowered into the LST.

The risk of death or serious injury was great. The two ships, ours and each LST, were lashed together so that the people could step from one to another. The vessels pitched perilously in the swelling sea all through the unloading, the hulls banging and separating. The lines might part; somebody could be crushed between the two ships.

From every nook and cranny the refugees streamed. Fathers untied the sashes they wore, wrapped them securely around the waists of their children and hoisted them from the holds. It took many hours, but 7,000 persons were packed into each of the LST's.

Koreans do not show emotion readily but as I stood on the bridge, I saw expressions on faces that, even now, bring a warm glow to my heart. Our passengers, waving gaily, gave us all glances of profound gratitude.

I remained in command of the *Meredith Victory*, a Moore-McCormack Lines vessel, until her decommissioning in 1952, when she was berthed in the National Defense Reserve Fleet in Olympia, Washington.

Only a few months ago, President Eisenhower signed a bill into law honoring the entire vessel's complement. I am proud indeed of the citation that reads in part: "The courage and teamwork of her master, officers and crew in completing one of the greatest marine rescues in history, have caused the name of the *Meredith Victory* to be perpetuated as Gallant Ship."

No longer a captain

I am grateful for these honors, though I cannot wear the decorations. The reason for this is, I have taken my final vows and am no longer Capt. Leonard P. La Rue but Brother Marinus, O.S.B., of St. Paul's Abbey, Newton, N. J. The name comes, not from the sea, but the Blessed Mother of God.

I was always somewhat religious, even in my youth in Philadelphia. Man is composed of the sum total of his experiences, so all the things in my life helped to cement my determination to enter the monastery. However, I am certain that this one event I have just described played a leading part in my decision.

I think often of that voyage. I think of how such a small vessel was able to hold so many persons and surmount endless perils without harm to a soul.

And as I think, the clear, unmistakable message comes to me that on that Christmastide, in the bleak and bitter waters off the shores of Korea, God's own hand was at the helm of my ship. — The E

CAPTAIN La RUE BECOMES BROTHER MARINUS

One of the most remarkable of U.S. sea heroes is today a Benedictine brother.

Captain Leonard La Rue, who entered the merchant marine directly from school in Philadelphia, became commanding officer of the *Meredith Victory* in 1950, and a few months later guided his ship on the thrilling Christmas rescue voyage he describes in this article. Four years later he entered St. Paul's Abbey, Newton, N. J., to become Brother Marinus, a member of the Missionary Order of St. Benedict.

